

Weed rituals: a cross-cultural connection to calm

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Visiting Varanasi, India, you can't help but notice the ceremonial pyres burning constantly along the riverbanks. Pilgrims come from all over to bathe in the holy waters of the Ganges and observe the *sadhus* — religious sages who dedicate their lives to meditation and asceticism.

These devotional men are known to be avid ceremonial cannabis consumers and watching them puff ganja out of handmade chillums is a common sight in consecrated locations across the country. They inhale the herb (locally known as *bhanga* — or *charas*, in its resin form) when praising Shiva, the deity of virtue and one of the most important gods of Hinduism.

Using marijuana is commonplace in other religions too: Shinto Buddhists used to burn hemp plants as incense during their ceremonies; Rastafarians believe the plant elevates your livity; some Muslims recognize it as *halal* (permissible).

It's not surprising that spiritualists throughout history have honored and taken advantage of the plant's properties to meditate and reach higher states of mind.

Cannabis culture rituals

Part of what everyone who practices meditation or cannabis consumption have in mind is the involvement in rituals. Preparing for meditation often there.

We find a moment for ourselves, close our eyes, and focus. We limit distractions and commit to a non-judgmental experience. Anyone who's ever smoked can definitely relate. We zone out so we can look within.

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Our rituals help us find ourselves, and many of us practice the same ones to symbolize our own comfort or readiness to receive. Preparing your accouterments to roll a joint, cleaning and refreshing your pipe or bong, and lighting incense to the sound of ambient music are all reminiscent of rituals practiced in holy spaces.

Just as mystics have hallowed shrines and temples where they have all they need to practice, stoners have a variety of intimate smoking spots where they feel safe to carry out their quirky preparation behaviors.

What cannabis and meditation have in common

(Courtesy of Cannaclusive)

There are also measurable biological reactions and physical effects surrounding our human need for rituals. Years of research have demonstrated that we have an endocannabinoid system composed of millions of nerve endings.

These nerve endings metabolize over 100 different cannabinoids found naturally in weed, each of them impacting our body and brain in similar ways to meditation. For instance, Pranayama, a breathing training developed by yogis thousands of years ago, has a similar effect.

In Pranayama, practitioners draw energy from the cosmos following a series of exercises that maximize oxygen input and intensifies carbon dioxide output, regulating our neural synapsis and resulting in a feeling of deep relaxation.

When we move the breath in and out of our body, we begin to calm the fight or flight response that lays in our amygdala, the part of the brain responsible for feelings of anxiety or tranquility. This amygdala also contains nerve receptors that flare or shut-down when we consume cannabis.

Home of both CB1 and CB2 receptors, the amygdala is responsible for our coordination, endocrine functions, and sensory perception. Whenever we meditate or take a toke of herb, we begin to alter the way chemicals (like dopamine, serotonin, norepinephrine, and GABA, to name a few) stimulate our brain and body.

One molecule in particular highlights the similarities between consuming cannabis and meditation: anandamide. The root of the word comes from *ananda*, the name of one of Buddha's disciples and the Hindu (Sanskrit) word for 'perfect bliss'. In cannabis, it's known as the bliss molecule.

As a cannabinoid, anandamide brings us full circle with the mind and body connection that can be accessed through both cannabis and meditation-revealing that cultures that practice both activities have more in common than you might think.

No matter your religion or culture, starting your own ritual can lead you down a path of enlightenment and calm. Honor cannabis and meditation separately, or bring them together to explore the edges of consciousness and transcend.

